

1-1-1989

# A view from the front line: Literacy outreach of Los Angeles Public Library

Anthony Bernier

San Jose State University, [anthony.bernier@sjsu.edu](mailto:anthony.bernier@sjsu.edu)

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## Recommended Citation

Anthony Bernier. "A view from the front line: Literacy outreach of Los Angeles Public Library" *California State Library Foundation Bulletin* (1989): 12-13.

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**Patron:** Repository, Institutional

**Journal Title:** California State Library Foundation  
bulletin.

**Volume:** 26 **Issue:** n/a

**Month/Year:** january 1989**Pages:** n/a

**Article Author:**

**Article Title:** A view from the front line; Literacy  
outreach of Los Angeles Public Library

**Imprint:** [Sacramento, Calif.] ; California State

**ILL Number:** 95267286



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**(Title 17, U.S. Code).**

GES: How has learning to read made your life different with your children and their growing up?

LW: They come and jump on my lap now, and they want me to do their homework for them. I tell them that I can't because the teacher says, "Well, Mrs. Wilson, they've got to do it themselves." I just show them how to do it. My kids are getting where they're coming to Mama and want me to do all of their work. So, I help them, and I'm learning right along with them.

GES: You are learning some of the things that you missed in school then?

LW: Yes, and I'm having a ball. So, it's really great.

GES: You are a teacher's aide. What do you do at school?

LW: I work with the preschool on Thursdays and Fridays every week. Mrs. Davis took me in to help with the little ones there. The little ones just gang up on me when I'm there. Some of them cry when I leave. She says, "You've made really good friends with the little ones." Even the little ones that have been placed in so many different homes. No one has reached out to them, so someone's got to be able to give a little love to them because that's what makes them go on — knowing that someone cares for them.

GES: You want to be a teacher?

LW: Yes, I do.

GES: How is the literacy program going to help you accomplish this goal?

LW: It has made me know that I can learn. I was always told that I could never be a teacher. But now I say that I can do it. You have got to have made up your mind that you can do it. I have pushed myself really hard to show that I can. Learning to read is really important — everyone should know how. As a matter of fact, I went to the doctor the other day, and I started talking about the program. The doctor said that he had some people that were coming in there that can't read. I told him about the program, and he said that he's going to get in contact with the program.

GES: So you have become a spokesperson for the literacy program?

LW: Yes, I tell everyone I can. It has really helped me out.

GES: Well, I think you are a very brave and wonderful person to come and share with us here about your experiences. We congratulate you for your success.

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## A View From the Front Line

By Anthony Bernier

One of the things that I would like to express on behalf of all of the coordinators and trainers up and down the state is a sincere debt that we owe to the State Library for the support given to us from the very beginning and the emphasis on adult learning that has been made. It has been inspiring for all of us working in the field to know that *there are people working for us*. What I will be able to share is *the view from the bottom*.

I coordinate five reading centers in Los Angeles. I initiated programs at two branches and I also work in two other centers and coordinate the work at the downtown YMCA. I am what you call a floater in the library system, and a lot of my time is taken up traveling from one place to another. I get to see a very large landscape of the literacy issue by being involved in so many different kinds of communities in Los Angeles. I also train tutors and have helped make our program one of the most successful in the state.

I am also a librarian. I come from a library tradition and the work that I do really comes less from a community activist position *per se* than from a librarian's position. One of the reasons that I liked the work from the beginning

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Mr. Bernier coordinates the library literacy program in branches of the Los Angeles Public Library. These neighborhood reading centers are important points of contact for hundreds of new adult learners in the inner city. These remarks are excerpted from a presentation made by Mr. Bernier at the annual conference of the California Library Association in Fresno in November 1988.

was that my own view of what librarians ought to be doing more of is being less reactive. Libraries should be proactive agencies, going out into the community and finding out what people need and trying to marshal the resources to address those needs. The adult literacy project is that experience, and I am grateful to be a part of this.

Linda Wilson talked about her own experience, her own relationship to a non-reading world, and some of the things that she had experienced growing up. Some of the things she discussed are very common to the people that I interview as adult learners as well. The fact that she was assessed rather early as being someone deficient mentally and told for years that her mental capacity wasn't up to snuff is typical of many adult learners. There are a lot of reasons why people are assessed in this way. The reasons range all the way from racism to true reading disabilities. But the labels applied too early can label one for life.

In Los Angeles, we have not only an enormous metropolis, but we have a complicated matrix of people — people coming to the city as new immigrants with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds as well as those who were born and raised in the United States. The people that we work with are not learning English as a second language, because we refer the people needing ESL to the Los Angeles City United School District. We work with those people who speak English and by and large have spoken English their entire lives.

Many of the people that I interview did not get their basic skills in school. Somehow they were passed over. As a result, they were outside of the group in school. Each developed their own patterns; many became involved in gang activities or drug and alcohol abuse. Many find that they need to support each other. One of the things that I have learned in working with the literacy program is that learning is an intimate thing. Basic nurturing is as important as the academic skills that you get in school. It is the nurturing of your self-esteem and your image of yourself. Learning is an intimate thing that we can provide in a one-to-one tutoring program

that can't be replicated with computers; it cannot be replicated in large classrooms with lots and lots of textbooks or with any kind of other support. It has got to be a one-to-one contact — one person reaching out and sharing with another person. It has got to be a partnership along the way.

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There are a number of benefits to the library that we often overlook. When I am training, I ask people in for tutor training how many of them have library cards. Less than half generally have library cards. By the time the training is finished, I am sure that they all have library cards and have been introduced to the library. People also discover other library services that they may not have been aware of prior to becoming involved in the tutoring programs.

We have also increased the library's profile with social service agencies. The program sometimes takes us into the arena of social activism, which is one of the reasons that brought me into library work in the first place. I am gratified that we are involved with adult schools and we work closely with them. I would like to get some of the gang members as tutors and get them involved in teaching people to read. A lot of the gang members can read. If we could get them into the program, it would increase their value to their community.